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Education as Formation

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Education as Formation

Abstract

"Most all of us have had a "long internship" in school--from kindergarten through high school--and we think we know what teachers do. Teaching is a very public profession, after all. But there is more to being a teacher than sharing information."

Posting about the formative nature of education from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/education-as-formation/>

Keywords

In All Things, education philosophy, educational formation, teaching, teachers, transformation, students

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Education as Formation

 allinallthings.org/education-as-formation/

Dave Mulder

I was a middle school teacher for the first fourteen years of my professional life. When I would meet someone new and they would ask me what I do for a living and I would share that I was a middle school science teacher, I usually got one of two reactions: either a look of painful sympathy, as if to say, “Oh, I’m sorry you are subjected to that on a daily basis,” or else a wide-eyed, “Wow. I could *never* do that!”

I find these reactions somewhat fascinating...but not all that surprising. Most all of us have had a “long internship” in schools—from kindergarten through high school—and we think we know what teachers do. And, to be fair, we do have some ideas. Teaching is a very public profession, after all.

It’s not for everyone. James admonishes us, “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”¹ And this sense of judging teachers seems widely held in our culture; take note, for example, of how often people quote George Bernard Shaw’s zinger: “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.”

We need to reconsider this cultural perception so often held of educators. Scripture clearly demonstrates that teaching is a spiritual gift.² And as such, education must be viewed in a different light. Oftentimes, formal education is viewed as transmission of information—as if the teacher’s role is to open the student’s head and pour in a bucketful of knowledge. I believe this reduces the whole truth of the vocation of teaching to just one aspect of education. Teaching is a much richer and nuanced endeavor than simply passing on all the things one knows.

We need to think of education as *formation*, not just *information*. James K. A. Smith describes education as a way of shaping what we love, not just what we think.³ So often we seem to focus on just the cognitive, academic aspects of education, but education is about all of life—not just what we think. Scripture reminds us that we are to love God with our whole heart and soul and mind, and that we are to pass along the Truth to the next generation.⁴ The implication is that this sort of education is about a way of living, and not just about “knowing.” While increasing knowledge is certainly a part of what it means to become educated, a biblical view of teaching and learning is so much more than just enlightening the mind.

Parker Palmer says, “We teach who we are.”⁵ For Christian teachers, our identity in Christ means that we will approach our craft from a different set of ground rules. Every instructional decision, every interaction with a student, everything that shapes the atmosphere of the classroom is subject to the reign and rule of Christ. From the way I unfold the content of the curriculum, to the sort of questions I ask in class, to the way I mark papers, to whether or not I meet students at the door of the classroom, all of it matters!

So, I am a middle school teacher at heart. Some may view this vocation with sympathy, or even aversion, but I see teaching as a high calling! Teachers have the blessing of shaping not only students’ heads (how they think,) but their hearts (what they love,) and their hands (how they live) as well.

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Footnotes

1. James 3:1 (NIV) [↩](#)
2. See Romans 12:4-8, 1 Corinthians 12:27-31, Ephesians 4:11-13, and Colossians 3:16. [↩](#)
3. See *Desiring the Kingdom* for a thorough exploration of this idea. Smith, J.K.A. [Desiring the kingdom: Worship, worldview, and cultural formation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009). [↩](#)
4. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 [↩](#)
5. Palmer, P. J. [The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life](#). (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998.) [↩](#)
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